

I. PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Court adopts the procedural history as stated in the parties' briefs.

Plaintiff filed the present action on October 21, 2017. She assigns error to the Administrative Law Judge (ALJ)'s formulation of her mental Residual Functional Capacity ("RFC").² See Plaintiff's "Memorandum ..." at 4-8 (document #10). The ALJ failed to explain why he did not account for the moderate difficulty in concentration, persistence or pace in his formulation of Plaintiff's RFC. (Tr. 19-23).

II. STANDARD OF REVIEW

The Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) and § 1383(c)(3), limits this Court's review of a final decision of the Commissioner to: (1) whether substantial evidence supports the Commissioner's decision, Richardson v. Perales, 402 U.S. 389, 390, 401 (1971); and (2) whether the Commissioner applied the correct legal standards. Hays v. Sullivan, 907 F.2d 1453, 1456 (4th Cir. 1990); see also Hunter v. Sullivan, 993 F.2d 31, 34 (4th Cir. 1992) (per curiam). The District Court does not review a final decision of the Commissioner de novo. Smith v. Schweiker, 795 F.2d 343, 345 (4th Cir. 1986); King v. Califano, 599 F.2d 597, 599 (4th Cir. 1979); Blalock v. Richardson, 483 F.2d 773, 775 (4th Cir. 1972).

As the Social Security Act provides, "[t]he findings of the [Commissioner] as to any fact, if supported by substantial evidence, shall be conclusive." 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). In Smith v. Heckler, 782 F.2d 1176, 1179 (4th Cir. 1986), quoting Richardson v. Perales, 402 U.S. 389, 401 (1971), the Fourth Circuit defined "substantial evidence" thus:

²The Social Security Regulations define "Residual Functional Capacity" as "what [a claimant] can still do despite his limitations." 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(a). The Commissioner is required to "first assess the nature and extent of [the claimant's] physical limitations and then determine [the claimant's] Residual Functional Capacity for work activity on a regular and continuing basis." 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(b).

Substantial evidence has been defined as being “more than a scintilla and do[ing] more than creat[ing] a suspicion of the existence of a fact to be established. It means such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.”

See also Seacrist v. Weinberger, 538 F.2d 1054, 1056-57 (4th Cir. 1976) (“We note that it is the responsibility of the [Commissioner] and not the courts to reconcile inconsistencies in the medical evidence”).

The Fourth Circuit has long emphasized that it is not for a reviewing court to weigh the evidence again, nor to substitute its judgment for that of the Commissioner, assuming the Commissioner’s final decision is supported by substantial evidence. Hays v. Sullivan, 907 F.2d at 1456 (4th Cir. 1990); see also Smith v. Schweiker, 795 F.2d at 345; and Blalock v. Richardson, 483 F.2d at 775. Indeed, this is true even if the reviewing court disagrees with the outcome – so long as there is “substantial evidence” in the record to support the final decision below. Lester v. Schweiker, 683 F.2d 838, 841 (4th Cir. 1982).

III. DISCUSSION OF CLAIM

The question before the ALJ was whether Plaintiff became disabled at any time.³ Plaintiff challenges the ALJ’s determination of her RFC. The ALJ is solely responsible for assessing a claimant’s RFC. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1546(c) & 416.946(c). In making that assessment, the ALJ must consider the functional limitations resulting from the claimant’s

³Under the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 301, et seq., the term “disability” is defined as an:

inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than 12 months
Pass v. Chater, 65 F. 3d 1200, 1203 (4th Cir. 1995).

medically determinable impairments. SSR96-8p, available at 1996 WL 374184, at *2. The ALJ must also “include a narrative discussion describing how the evidence supports each conclusion, citing specific medical facts . . . and nonmedical evidence.” Id.

Plaintiff has the burden of establishing her RFC by showing how her impairments affect her functioning. See 20 C.F.R. §§404.1512(c) & 416.912(c); see also, e.g., Stormo v. Barnhart, 377 F.3d 801, 806 (8th Cir. 2004) (“[t]he burden of persuasion . . . to demonstrate RFC remains on the claimant, even when the burden of production shifts to the Commissioner at step five”); Plummer v. Astrue, No. 5:11-cv-06-RLV-DSC, 2011 WL 7938431, at *5 (W.D.N.C. Sept. 26, 2011) (Memorandum and Recommendation) (“[t]he claimant bears the burden of providing evidence establishing the degree to which her impairments limit her RFC”) (citing Stormo), adopted, 2012 WL 1858844 (May 22, 2102), aff’d, 487 F. App’x 795 (4th Cir. Nov. 6, 2012).

In Mascio v. Colvin, 780 F.3d 632 (4th Cir. 2015), the Fourth Circuit held that “remand may be appropriate . . . where an ALJ fails to assess a claimant's capacity to perform relevant functions, despite contradictory evidence in the record, or where other inadequacies in the ALJ's analysis frustrate meaningful review.” 780 F.3d at 636 (quoting Cichocki v. Astrue, 729 F.3d 172, 177 (2d Cir. 2013)). This explicit function-by-function analysis is not necessary when functions are irrelevant or uncontested.

In Mascio, the Court also “agree[d] with other circuits that an ALJ does not account ‘for a claimant's limitations in concentration, persistence, and pace by restricting the hypothetical question to simple, routine tasks or unskilled work.’” 780 F.3d at 638 (quoting Winschel v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec., 631 F.3d 1176, 1180 (11th Cir. 2011) (joining the Third, Seventh, and Eighth Circuits)). See also SSR 96-8p (where ALJ completes Psychiatric Review Technique Form

("PRTF"), mental RFC evaluation for use at steps 4 and 5 "requires a more detailed assessment by itemizing various functions ... summarized on the PRTF"). "The ability to perform simple tasks differs from the ability to stay on pace. Only the latter limitation would account for a claimant's limitation in concentration, persistence or pace." Id.

Applying those legal principles to the record here, the Court concludes that this matter must be remanded for a new hearing. In formulating Plaintiff's RFC, the ALJ accounted for her moderate difficulties in maintaining concentration, persistence or pace, if at all, by limiting her to "simple, routine tasks, with only occasional interaction with the public and occasional interaction with coworkers." (Tr. 20-21). Even if supported by substantial evidence, limitations to low stress work with simple tasks and limited contact with others do not "account for a limitation in concentration, persistence or pace." Id. See also Parham v. Colvin, Dist. Court No. 1:15-CV-063-GCM-DCK (W.D.N.C. August 8, 2016), Kittrell v. Colvin, Dist. Court No. 5:14-cv-163-RJC (W.D.N.C. March 6, 2016), Newton v. Colvin, Dist. Court No. 3:14-cv-371-RJC-DSC, 2015 WL 4411110, at *3 (W.D.N.C. July 20, 2015); Scruggs v. Colvin, Dist. Court No. 3:14-cv-00466-MOC, 2015 WL 2250890, at *4-5 (W.D.N.C. May 13, 2015).

As stated in Mascio, "[p]erhaps the ALJ can explain why [Plaintiff's] moderate limitation in concentration, persistence or pace ... does not translate into a limitation in [his] residual functional capacity.... But because the ALJ gave no explanation, a remand is in order." Id.

By ordering remand pursuant to sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), the Court does not forecast a decision on the merits of Plaintiff's application for disability benefits. See Patterson v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec. Admin., 846 F.3d 656, 663 (4th Cir. 2017). "Under § 405(g), 'each final decision of the Secretary [is] reviewable by a separate piece of litigation,' and a sentence-four

remand order ‘terminate[s] the civil action’ seeking judicial review of the Secretary's final decision.” Shalala v. Schaefer, 509 U.S. 292, 299, 113 S. Ct. 2625, 2630-31, 125 L.Ed. 2d 239 (1993) (quoting Sullivan v. Hudson, 490 U.S. 877, 892, 109 S.Ct. 2248, 2258, 104 L.Ed.2d 941 (1989)).

IV. ORDER

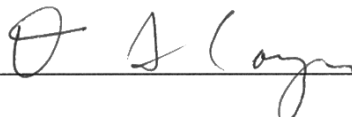
NOW THEREFORE IT IS ORDERED:


1. Plaintiff’s “Motion for Summary Judgment” (document #9) is **GRANTED**; Defendant’s “Motion for Summary Judgment” (document #13) is **DENIED**; and the Commissioner’s decision is **REVERSED**.⁴ This matter is **REMANDED** for a new hearing pursuant to Sentence Four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).⁵

2. The Clerk is directed to send copies of this Memorandum and Order to counsel for the parties.

SO ORDERED.

Signed: July 13, 2018



David S. Cayer
United States Magistrate Judge 

⁴In reversing the Commissioner’s decision, as noted above, the Court expresses no opinion as to the merits of Plaintiff’s claim for disability. An order of “reversal” here does not mandate a finding of disability on remand. The Court finds the ALJ’s decision deficient for the reasons stated herein, and consequently that decision cannot stand. “The ALJ’s decision must stand or fall with the reasons set forth in the ALJ’s decision[.]” Raney v. Berryhill, No. 3:16-CV-3256-BT, 2018 WL 1305606, at *4 (N.D. Tex. Mar. 12, 2018) (quoting Newton v. Apfel, 209 F.3d 448, 455 (5th Cir. 2000) (citing Knipe v. Heckler, 755 F.2d 141, 149 n.16 (10th Cir. 1985); Dong Sik Kwon v. Immigration & Naturalization Serv., 646 F.2d 909, 916 (5th Cir. 1981)); see also Cole v. Barnhart, 288 F.3d 149, 151 (5th Cir. 2002) (“It is well-established that [the Court] may only affirm the Commissioner’s decision on the grounds which [s]he stated for doing so.”).

⁵Sentence Four authorizes “a judgment affirming, modifying, or reversing the decision ... with or without remanding the cause for a rehearing.” Sullivan v. Finkelstein, 496 U.S. 617, 625 (1990).